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Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Chester L. Cooper

DATE: 3 December 1953

FROM : FE Staff, O/NE

SUBJECT: SE-53 and the Question of Chinese Communist Intervention in Force to Save the Viet Minh

We agree with the text of para 10 of the 1 December 1953 draft of SE-53: that the chances are slightly better than even that China would not invade. Our view, which admittedly is of necessity largely judgment and little evidence, is partially given in para 9 of the 1 December draft. With apologies for repetition of portions of para 9, we believe that three general considerations against intervening in Communist thinking would outweigh considerations favoring intervention: (a) fear of the consequences; (b) Indochina is not of critical importance to Communist China and the USSR; and (c) ultimate realization of Communist objectives in Southeast Asia would not necessarily demand Chinese Communist intervention.

1. Fear of US retaliation against mainland China, and fear that this might lead to global war.

a. Communist China does not have the capability alone to defend itself against a full-scale US air war against it. China, if it intervened in Indochina, would be staking the possible destruction of its industries, transport system, major centers of population, and possibly the regime itself, against a hope that somehow the US would not retaliate as threatened, or that the USSR

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might somehow protect China from suffering such destruction. We do not feel the Chinese would so gamble.

b. Why did China go to all the trouble to call the war in Korea to a halt? Why did China agree to call off in Korea what was probably in many respects a situation advantageous to them? Why? No one knows definitely, but the more-or-less agreed judgment seems to be: the USSR wanted the war to end, and China wanted to avoid an expanded war and concentrate on domestic problems. Many of the considerations which dictated calling a halt in Korea would still apply in Indochina, and we feel that this Chinese basic decision for no war would tend still to apply even if their Viet Minh colleagues got in serious trouble.

c. We feel, further, that China would be uncertain about the USSR. China would probably attempt to clear an invasion with the USSR. We feel, for reasons given in next sub-paragraphs, that the USSR would tend not to OK such a policy. But even if USSR did OK it, we feel that Chinese leaders would not be convinced that the USSR would bail China out at the almost certain risk of global war in the event that severe US punishment of China subsequently occurred.

d. What about the USSR? We think that available evidence strongly supports ONE's recent estimates that the USSR is embarked on a patient, long-range pull, and wishes in the meantime to avoid

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stumbling into a global war not of its own choosing. We subscribe to General McArthur's thesis here, that the USSR, if at all possible, will itself choose the time and the circumstances of global war. We feel that the USSR's history, geographic position, present strengths relative to the West, and present leadership all incline it to play its global war cards close to its vest.

e. Would US retaliation against Communist China mean global war? No one can of course foresee, but we feel that the USSR would estimate the risks too great to OK a Chinese course of action inviting US retaliation against China. Soviet leaders may estimate that the USSR could avoid involvement in general Far Eastern war, but we cannot help feeling that the USSR would fear the risk of global war by miscalculation too great to give it a try. As for Communist China, getting grievously hurt by the academic to USAF would make/China the question of whether or not global war would ensue.

f. Would China and the USSR actually believe that the US could and would retaliate? The US could of course not insure this. But we feel that Communist action to date in the Korean and Indochina wars supports the view that they would believe us. Furthermore, the US could take a number of actions, if it had decided upon intervening and if it so wished, which would undoubtedly tend to erase any lingering doubts in the Communist mind. Such US

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steps might include added warning/s, deployment of atom-equipped US air and naval forces to the China theater, indications within the US that it was prepared to carry through, etc.

g. Comparisons to Chinese behavior in intervening in Korea are not necessarily valid. In 1950 a just-born Communist China may have felt that the US would not stop at the Yalu, but would use North Korea as a staging area against China. The picture is now somewhat different. We feel the Communists believe that the "McArthur solution" has been negated by both the Democratic and Republican Administrations in the US, and that, while the US would probably bomb China in retaliation for intervening in Indochina, the US would thereafter not seek to conquer all China from Indochina. Why? Because despite US intervention in Indochina and a readiness to bomb China if necessary the Communists would probably estimate that basic US policies are to avoid global war, avoid getting bogged down in a land war with China, and if at all possible "get the messes over with" in Asia and end the strategic maldeployment of US forces. Also different from the situation in late 1950 in Korea is the fact that US strength and impatience have grown greatly in the interval. Also, US stated intentions in Asia have been made more clear. Lastly, the USSR and China appear to have gotten rid of some lingering germs of Zhdanovism, and have settled down to a long-range pull.

2. Indochina and the Viet Minh are not of sufficiently critical importance to China and the USSR to risk an expanded war, and possibly a global war, in their behalf.

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a. Strategically, Indochina is less important to China, and infinitely less important to the USSR, than is Korea. The establishment of US power in Indochina, while not welcomed by the Communists, would nevertheless not in itself pose an unacceptable threat to the heart of Chinese power, and certainly not to that of the USSR.

b. The Viet Minh and the "DRV" have not been fully integrated within the Communist bloc. There are no treaties of alliance or even friendship known to exist between the DRV and the USSR or China. No Soviet diplomatic representatives known to be there. Soviet diplomacy, particularly since its April 1953 reply to President Eisenhower's 16 April speech, has disclaimed Soviet control of this ostensible "national liberation movement." There is evidence that the Viet Minh enjoy a certain independence of action, and while Soviet and Chinese influence in the DRV may be increasing at present, the DRV is not the Sino-Soviet puppet that North Korea is. Thus, the Communist, and in particular, the Soviet commitment in Indochina is limited. The fiction of an "independent" movement exists, and the USSR might feel that, if absolutely necessary, it could look the other way if the Viet Minh were being defeated, without suffering a crippling loss of prestige.

c. Valuable as the Viet Minh "national liberation movement" may be in advancing the USSR's objectives in Asia, the movement happens physically to occupy a territory remote from Moscow. The

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USSR, which historically has accepted defeats closer to home, would in our opinion accept a set-back to this movement if it had to, rather than gamble on a course which might cause the USSR to abandon what appears to be a basic decision to avoid global war; we feel, however, that the USSR would attempt to veto a Chinese intervention rather than risk having to make such a decision. Another consideration tending to dampen Soviet enthusiasm for a Chinese intervention in force in Indochina is that of new problems such intervention might introduce into the Sino-Soviet relationship. The USSR would probably not be overjoyed at the prospect of a Chinese, as opposed to a present more-or-less Sino-Soviet, Indochina.

3. China's quandary as to what course to choose in order to prevent a decisive defeat of the Viet Minh would not necessarily be that of an either-or-choice to invade Indochina, since alternative courses to intervention would hold promise of eventual, if interrupted, furthering of Communist bloc objectives in Asia.

a. If faced with the defeat of the Viet Minh field forces, none of the courses open to the Communists would of course look too inviting to them, and the choice would have to be that of a lesser of evils. However, when compared to the great risks involved in invading Indochina, the alternative of continuing to support the remnants of the Viet Minh seems to us to be a course offering much less evil consequences in the Communist mind. We feel they might well estimate that a total US victory in Indochina was improbable except perhaps over the long run, given the terrain of Indochina, the type of warfare, and the many political and psychological factors involved. China would continue to support

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the remnants of the Viet Minh, always at a level just below their guess as to what the US would choose to call "identifiable intervention," in a long war of bush-whacking against the US. By so doing, Communist ends would profit elsewhere by this tying down indefinitely of US strength in a secondary theater. China and the USSR would hope that long US tenure in Indochina, contrasted with "correct" Chinese behavior, could be exploited politically in widening divisions between the US and other non-Communist powers. The Communists would hope that the US would in time sicken of the attrition, and, given insufficient cause to expand the war to China, would pull out, leaving fledgling regimes in Indochina which might in time be undermined by Communist efforts.

b. By not having China intervene, the Communists would hope to continue receiving support in Indochina from non-Communist elements, both in Viet Minh - and US - held territory. This course would also avoid probable sharpening of historic Chinese-Vietnamese antipathies which would occur if China intervened.

c. Lastly, by playing a patient, long-range game, China and the USSR would hope ultimately to realize their objectives in Southeast Asia by in time causing Burma, Thailand, or Indonesia to cave in, thus outflanking and encircling Indochina.

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